

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Toldos

Esav's Deception: A Deeper Look

Introduction: The Trappings of a Good Relationship

In the beginning of our parsha,¹ the Torah relates how the love of Yitzchak and Rivkah was divided significantly – though by no means entirely – between Esav and Yaakov respectively. This was something which would come to a head later in the parsha when the question arose as to which son should receive the blessings. The verse does not mention any particular basis for Rivkah's love of Yaakov, stating simply that she loved him; and indeed, no explanation for this is required! Yitzchak's love for Esav, on the other hand, is explained with the words “כִּי צִיד בְּפִי” (Ki Tzid B'Pai). What is the meaning of this phrase? The word “ציד” is quite straightforward, it means hunting or trapping. However, the word “בפיו – in his mouth” is somewhat open-ended, as the verse does not specify to *whose* mouth it refers. Let us consult the sources.

Onkelos translates this phrase as saying that Yitzchak would eat from Esav's hunting. In other words, according to Onkelos, the phrase “ציד בפיו” means: “[Esav's] trapping was in his – Yitzchak's – mouth.” Needless to say, this approach requires much explanation, for on the face of it, it is completely dumbfounding. How can Yitzchak favor Esav over Yaakov on the basis of something so mundane as eating from his hunting, to the extent that, ultimately, he judges Esav as being the one who deserves the blessings?

The Sages² provide a very different rendition of our phrase, whereby the word “בפיו” translates not as “in his, [i.e. Yitzchak's] mouth,” but rather, “with his, [i.e. Esav's] mouth,” for Esav trapped his father with his words. As the Midrash describes:

ושואלו: "אבא, היאך מעשרין את המלח ואת התבן?" כסבור אביו שהוא
מדקדק במצוות

¹ Bereishis 25:28.

² Bereishis Rabbah 63:10, cited in Rashi to Bereishis loc. cit.

He would ask: "Father, how does one take maaser (tithes) from salt and straw?" His father [thereby] thought that he was particular regarding mitzvos.

Actually, this rather impressive sounding question itself requires our examination, for in reality, one does *not* take maaser from those items at all. As such, this question sounds not so much an expression of punctiliousness in mitzvah observance as one of total ignorance! The commentators explain that Esav was asking how, even though these items are exempt from maaser, one could nevertheless perform the mitzvah with them as a matter of added stringency, beyond that which the basic law requires. Yitzchak was very taken by this expression of extra piety, and reserved a special love for Esav.

Broadening the Picture

Yet still the question remains. Esav's pietistic questions notwithstanding (and we can assume he had a few more), how could they cause Yitzchak to believe that Esav was the *more deserving* of his two sons? He had to have known that Yaakov's quality and his way of life far surpassed that of Esav!

Moreover, a comment of Rashi later in the parsha seems to contradict the idea that Yitzchak viewed Esav as someone who was particular in performing mitzvos. In Chapter twenty-seven,³ as a prelude to giving Esav the blessings, Yitzchak tells him to sharpen his knives, go out to the field, and bring back some of his hunting. Commenting on these words, Rashi explains:

Sharpen your utensils – and slaughter correctly, so that you do not feed me non-kosher food.

And trap for me – from ownerless animals, and not from stolen ones

These comments are quite astounding. It seems that even after all these years Yitzchak did not have such a high regard for Esav's mitzvah performance at all, suspecting rather that, unless told otherwise, he would feed him food that is either not kosher, stolen – or both! Yet how does this go together with the earlier comment of Rashi, according to which Yitzchak was completely taken in by Esav's questions? More importantly, in light of these later comments, how can he

³ Verse 3.

nonetheless proceed to choose Esav as the one on whom to bestow the blessings?

Two Types of Godly Living

R' Yosef Zvi Salant, in his commentary Be'er Yosef to our parsha, reveals a deeper level to Esav's deception of Yitzchak. He prefaces by noting that living one's life in service of Hashem can take one of two forms, depending on the nature of the person:

- For someone who has naturally positive tendencies, it takes the form of continually developing and perfecting them.
- For one who has naturally negative tendencies, it takes the form of striving to overcome and elevate them.

Indeed, in some respects, there is room to argue that the second person is more worthy than the first, as he has to battle and overcome his tendencies to do the right thing. In this regard, the Gemara⁴ states that a person who has a tendency towards shedding blood can still choose his path in terms of how he enlists it.

- If he is a tzaddik, he can become a *mohel*, or a doctor, channeling his nature towards the performance of mitzvos.
- If he is a regular person, he can become a butcher, using his nature to secure a livelihood.
- If he is a wicked person he will become a murderer.

Yitzchak knows that Esav is no Yaakov. Yaakov is a naturally spiritual person, while Esav emerged from the womb literally the color of blood, giving a clear indication of where his tendencies would lie. Esav's deception of Yitzchak lies not in his pretending to be a Yaakov, but in pretending to work on himself as Esav. This is why Onkelos explains the basis of Yitzchak's love for Esav as the fact that he would bring him his hunting. This represented Esav's seeking to elevate and sublimate his tendency for bloodshed into the mitzvah of honoring his father!

The Original Straw Man

⁴ Shabbos 156a.

With this in mind, we return to the question that Esav is famous for asking: “How does one take maaser from salt and straw?” The Pardes Yosef⁵ explains that this question so came to characterize Esav because it was about him! As we noted, one does not actually take maaser from salt and straw. The reason for this is that the elevation of maaser applies only to actual food, while salt and straw are merely accessories to food. Thus, Esav was asking, “Father, I have no doubt that Yaakov will achieve his perfection, after all, he is “the food” – the real article. But what about someone like me who is merely an accessory, like salt and straw? Is there any hope for me?”

Esav’s portrayal of himself toward his father was thus, not as the finished article, but as a work in progress. We can now understand how there is no contradiction between Esav’s halachic questions and Yitzchak feeling that he needed to remind his son to sharpen his knife and to make sure the animals he trapped were not owned by others. Esav did not balk at such reminders. On the contrary, his response to all this was: “Thank you for reminding me, father; you know I try, and that I forget sometimes. Thank you for not giving up on me!”

For Whom the Blessings?

And so, Yitzchak’s heart goes out to Esav, feeling that there is room for him in the future of the Jewish people. And indeed, the nation will need both those who are involved in material pursuits as well as the spiritual, not unlike the Yissachar-Zevulun partnership which would later exist within Yaakov’s own children. As such, he decides to give Esav the blessings, which are primarily material in nature: “the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth.”⁶ Rivkah, however, judges otherwise. She recognizes the charade in Esav’s questions, and is convinced that he has forfeited his place in the program of Avraham and Yitzchak.

How does Rivkah see what Yitzchak does not? There are two classical answers to this question.

1. Rivkah has a keener eye for deception, having grown up with Lavan, a master deceiver, whose schemes and manipulations we will encounter in next weeks’ parsha.

⁵ R’ Yosef Potztonovsky, Pardes Yosef, Parshas Toldos.

⁶ Bereishis 28:1.

2. As related in the beginning of our parsha, upon experiencing severe turbulence during her pregnancy, Rivkah received a prophecy informing her that her two sons would be heading in opposite directions.⁷ Although this could mean many things, and by no means consigns Esav to a life of wickedness, it does alert her to the notion that his path may be decidedly different to that of Yaakov. Yitzchak received no such message, and it seems quite clear that Rivkah never informed him of the prophecy she received.⁸

An Akeidah Moment

However, there is an additional consideration, whereby Yitzchak had active reason to expect that both of his sons would be part of the future of the Jewish people. This idea dated back to the very moment they were born.

The Torah relates how Yaakov emerged from the womb with his hand holding on to Esav's heel. Seeing this, Yitzchak named him Yaakov – deriving from the word “*ekev* – heel.”⁹ Upon reflection, this choice of name requires some explanation. After all, why should the fact – curious though it may be – that the second son was holding on to the heel of the first become the basis of his name?

R' Leib Heyman¹⁰ offers a stunning suggestion. Undoubtedly, one of the outstanding spiritual highlights of Yitzchak's life was when he was prepared to allow his father to bring him as a sacrifice, as described in the end of Parshas Vayeira.¹¹ We refer to this event as “Akeidas Yitzchak,” which means “The Binding of Yitzchak,” referring to the Torah's description of Avraham tying him down before placing him on the altar.¹² Actually, the term “akeidah” refers specifically

⁷ Ibid. 25:23.

⁸ This idea will help us resolve a seemingly simple question. When Rivkah experiences trouble with her pregnancy, she travels to the Yeshiva of Shem, who is a prophet, in order to receive an explanation as to her situation. Upon reflection, this trip seems entirely unnecessary, seeing as both her husband Yitzchak and her father-in-law Avraham were prophets. This means that in terms of seeking an answer from a prophet, she could not have been better placed! Why, then, did she travel to Shem? However, Rivkah understood that the answer to her question will likely have implications for the future of her family, and hence it may be withheld from the family members themselves. As such, she had no choice but to “outsource” the question to someone who was a prophet but who was also not part of her family, and thus she travelled to Shem. In the event, her concerns were borne out, as it seems Yitzchak was not meant to know about the diverging nature of his two sons (R' David Pardo, Maskil le'David).

⁹ Ibid. verse 26.

¹⁰ Chikrei Lev, Parshas Toldos.

¹¹ Bereishis Chapter 22.

¹² Verse 9.

to a form of binding whereby the hands are tied to the heels, so that this term encapsulates the state of absolute submission that Yitzchak attained towards Hashem's will. In this light, let us imagine Yitzchak's reaction when he saw two sons emerge in a most unusual manner, with *the hand of one attached to the heel of the other!* For him, this was a clear evocation of the Akeidah, indicating that both sons were destined to be worthy heirs to that event. Indeed, so great was his excitement over this portent that he called the second son Yaakov after this event! Yitzchak thus lived in expectation of both his sons continuing his legacy, and therefore had a greater inclination to judge Esav favorably.

In truth, Yitzchak's expectations for Esav were not entirely unfounded for, as mentioned, Esav's natural tendencies toward bloodshed etc. did not mean that he was condemned to lead a life of wickedness. His challenge was to deal with these tendencies, channeling them toward positive goals. What Rivkah saw more clearly than Yitzchak was that Esav had abdicated on this challenge, and hence she set in motion the means through which the only worthy son, Yaakov, would receive the blessings and continue single-handedly the legacy of Avraham and Yitzchak.